



FILM WORKS A HEALING MIRACLE OF ITS OWN

By Mark Caro, [Chicago Tribune](#) Movie Writer January 26, 2000

PARK CITY, Utah -- Members of the Cly family have been in movies for longer than just about anyone else at this year's Sundance Film Festival, though they never actually saw themselves on screen until a couple of years ago. That was when Chicago filmmaker Jeff Spitz, 41, and Barrington builder William Kennedy, 58, traveled to Monument Valley, Ariz., to unlock the secrets of a silent film called "Navajo Boy" that Kennedy's late father, Robert, had made in the early 1950s. The 28-minute film, which portrayed the tribe's healing powers and was narrated at each screening by the filmmaker himself, featured unidentified members of a Navajo family.

Robert Kennedy died in 1980 without recording his live narration, and William Kennedy never stopped wondering who these people were and what exactly they were demonstrating on film. So he called Spitz in 1997, and they set out with a small film crew to locate the Navajos.

Little did they know that their work would result in the Cly family's reunion with a brother, John Wayne Cly, whom missionaries had taken away at the age of 1. Or that their research would touch on uranium poisoning, which killed John Wayne's mother. Or that because the Cly's were among the few Navajos willing to pose for pictures and to be filmed, they became probably the most photographed Indians of the region, appearing on countless postcards and in travel brochures, tourist photos, industrial films and Hollywood movies such as John Ford's "The Searchers."

Especially unlikely was the prospect that the Cly family, many of whom still live in Monument Valley without phones, would be taking a trip to a place where cellular phones are considered mandatory accessories: the ski resort town of Park City for the Sundance Film Festival. Spitz's documentary "The Return of Navajo Boy" is screening in the Native Forum section. The documentary debuted Sunday with a showing for the family, filmmakers and festival guests at the Sundance Institute, Robert Redford's idyllic resort and film center about 40 miles from Park City.

"It's great," John Wayne Cly said of seeing his family's story told to an audience. "It was really heart-filling to see everybody there. I had people come up to me and congratulate me and tell me the film was great, so it really made me feel good."

On Monday morning about 20 members of the Cly family -- covering three generations -- plus Spitz and Kennedy and members of their families gathered in a Park City diner for a final time together before most of the Navajos returned to their Arizona and New Mexico homes. A sister and brother, ages 15 and 11, acted as junior documentarians, aiming Spitz's camcorders at anything that moved.

Older family members, including Elsie Mae (Cly) Begay, Bernie Cly and their long-lost brother John Wayne Cly, now 45, enjoyed what amounted to a second family reunion, the first having occurred two years earlier when the youngest brother reappeared.



"I'm happy that I got this opportunity to get together with my family to watch the film for this occasion," Elsie Mae Begay said through an interpreter, the film's co-producer Bennie Klain. "I'm thankful to everyone who was involved in the production because really that's what triggered the return of my little brother, and it all started with Bill Kennedy, when he showed up with the old film."

Kennedy and Spitz were able to track down the Cly family after showing "Navajo Boy" stills to various people in the Monument Valley area. "When I first came to Monument Valley and met the Native Americans who were in the movie, I was very taken aback by the fact that they were so warm and so open to me and so willing to share with us, though a little bit fearful of what another white man was going to do to them," Kennedy said. "But once they understood that I had no malice and what I wanted to do was know about my father and this movie he did, they were very helpful." Here's the story: In the 1920s a man named Harry Goulding moved to Monument Valley, opened a trading post and became the region's biggest booster. Among those he encouraged to visit were filmmakers such as Ford, who shot "Stagecoach" there in 1938.

Goulding befriended Willie and Happy Cly, the grandparents of Elsie May, Bernie and John Wayne, and they agreed to pose for pictures. Not only did family members appear in various photographs and as movie extras, but in the early 1950s an energy company shot an industrial film called "A Navajo Journey" that promoted uranium mining on the reservation. Happy and Willie Cly starred as quaint, contented Navajos.

A few years later Elsie Zina, their daughter, died from a respiratory ailment that became common among Navajos who worked in the uranium mines. Her illness was cited as the reason that missionaries were able to take young John Wayne Cly and raise him until the age of 18 in New Mexico. "Navajo Boy," the elder Kennedy's film, was an attempt to offer a rare look at the healing rituals of the Navajos. Jimmy Cly, a cousin of the three siblings who didn't make the trip to Sundance, stars as a boy who, after his family becomes sick, rides a donkey to fetch the medicine man, who provides the appropriate treatment.

William Kennedy said his father, a young filmmaker who eventually settled in suburban Chicago to become a builder, used to travel around the country showing the film to various organizations, and it even aired on television once in the mid-1950s.

The Cly's never saw "Navajo Boy" until Spitz and Kennedy arrived in Monument Valley.

"When I saw myself as a young girl in the old film, I felt like I was young and vibrant all over again," Elsie Mae Begay said. "Seeing the old film helped me to remember things that I otherwise would have trouble remembering, things that happened when I was a little girl. I also liked it because I saw other family members, other relatives. It helped me to remember my family members from a long time ago, and it sort of brought them back to life for me."

A newspaper wrote a story about Spitz's documentary in progress, and John Wayne Cly, who was living in New Mexico, read it. His tearful reunion with his family is captured in the film, which Spitz said is tentatively slated to air on PBS in November.



How fitting then that the family was reunited again at Sundance. A movie brought the Clyds together, yet photographic and filmed images also played a role in tearing them apart.

"I don't think John Wayne the actor would have been in Monument Valley without pictures attracting his crew and John Ford and all the productions that came through there," Spitz said. "It was photography that drew people into Monument Valley. The missionaries who came to find a baby who they could give a better life were charmed about the idea of taking a baby named John Wayne.

"So you had pictures that had been used by outsiders to define that area. And John Wayne Cly comes back into the fold through pictures. I can't begin to pull apart all of those layers of meaning. All I can say is that it's a miracle that I was fortunate enough to be part of the process that brought him back and not part of the process that pulled him away."